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The Case of the Vanishing Presupposition

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One of the few things in linguistics which we are generally allowed to assume to be a constant is the presupposition of a given word at a given time; either a presupposition is there or it isn't. It appears, however, that even this "constant" must bite the dust. Take, for example, manage:

- (1)a John managed to cash the check.
- b John didn't manage to cash the check.
- (2) John tried to cash the check.

(2) follows from both (1)a and its negation, (1)b--therefore manage presupposes try. Unfortunately, there are a number of counterexamples, where the subject "manages" something which he is clearly not "trying" to do, as in (3) - (8).

- (3) My dog manages to get clawed by every cat that comes along.
- (4) Fred managed to get himself killed.
- (5) Pearl accidentally managed to get caught in the crossfire.
- (6) Harry managed to insult Ursula, and he hasn't the foggiest idea how he did it.
- (7) I seem to have managed to lose my wallet.
- (8) I wonder how I managed that?

A reading of try is blocked by overt semantic information in (5) - (8), e.g., "accidentally," "seem to," etc. While this presupposition is not overtly blocked in (3) and (4), it requires so much contextual chess-playing that I think it can be ruled out. Furthermore, manage is still possible even if it is specified that the subject tried not to accomplish the action in question, as in (9).

- (9) Harry spent all evening trying very hard not to insult Ursula, but he managed to insult her, all the same.

And, as if that were not enough, we can find quite a few examples in which the subject is inanimate, and so cannot try to do anything:

- (10) Sad movies always manage to make me cry.
- (11) It always manages to rain on my day off.
- (12) That old house has managed to remain unoccupied for years.
- (13) Writing this paper has managed to become quite a problem.

It seems, then, that manage sometimes presupposes try and sometimes does not.¹

Interestingly, (4) is slightly worse without the re-

flexive, and (3) and (5) sound slightly more natural with it. Furthermore, all three of these must take the get-passive or the result is disastrous:

- (3)a *?My dog manages to be clawed by every
cat that comes along.
- (4)a *Fred managed to be killed.
- (5)a *Pearl accidentally managed to be
caught in the crossfire.

As Robin Lakoff has noted (1971), the use of the get-passive frequently implies some responsibility on the part of the subject. Although clearly none of the subjects in (3) - (5) were trying to accomplish the action, it is implied that the result is not necessarily what would naturally have happened without any interference from the subject, which implies that the action was difficult (had the subject been trying to do it) or unlikely. In a similar sentence, for example:

- (14) It's pretty difficult to get yourself
killed while sweeping the streets, but
Fred managed it.

the implication, unless otherwise specified, is that Fred was not by any means trying to be killed, but rather that he did something unintentionally which resulted in his death.

This analysis is supported by sentences like (15) - (18).

- (15)a *Harry managed to insult Ursula, and
anyone could have done it, really.
- b Harry managed to insult Ursula, but
anyone could have done it, really.
- (16)a *Queen Elizabeth managed to live in
Buckingham Palace.
- b Annie the Charwoman managed to live
in Buckingham Palace
- (17)a *Zeus managed to make it thunder.
- b Agamemnon managed to make it thunder.
- (18) The baby managed to wake me up just
after I had gotten to sleep.

(15) is not acceptable unless the conjunction but is used, which, as Lakoff has noted (1970), indicates that the material in the second clause conflicts with expectations raised in the first clause. The clause "Harry managed to insult Ursula," therefore, leads us to expect that it is not true that "anyone could have done it," i.e., there is something difficult about insulting Ursula.² In (16) and (17), again, the 'a' sentences are bad because it is pragmatically presupposed to be no difficulty for Queen Elizabeth to live in Buckingham Palace or for Zeus to make it thunder. It is assumed to be difficult for Annie the Charwoman or Agamemnon to accomplish the respective actions. Finally, in (18), there are three possible interpretations: (a) the baby was

intentionally trying to wake the speaker up; more likely are (b) it is difficult to wake the speaker up, and (c) it is unlikely that the speaker should be awakened just exactly after he had gotten to sleep. Such multiple possibilities will be discussed in more detail below.

Manage, then, if it does not presuppose try, presupposes difficulty, as can be seen by negating a sentence like the first clause of (6), which will still commit us to the assumption that it is difficult to insult Ursula. As it happens, difficulty is a presupposition of try, since both (19)a and b commit us to (20):

- (19)a Poppy tried to write a 25-word squib.
- b Poppy didn't try to write a 25-word squib.
- (20) It is difficult to write a 25-word squib.

Since, if P presupposes Q and Q presupposes R, it follows that P presupposes R, manage would, by virtue of its presupposition of try, presuppose difficulty in any case. What is peculiar is that manage can presuppose difficulty when such presupposition clearly does not come via try.

However, a presupposition of difficulty will not necessarily account for examples like (10) - (13), as well as sentences like (21) and (22).

- (21) Our dog always manages to get diarrhea whenever the vet is on vacation.
- (22) Our neighbors managed to schedule their one wild party of the year the night before my German exam.

I don't think we want to say that it is difficult to make the speaker of (10) cry, or for a house to remain unoccupied, or for a dog to get diarrhea. There is, however, an implication of unlikelihood in all these sentences--i.e., it is unlikely that the dog should always get diarrhea at precisely the time when it cannot be treated, that the neighbors would schedule their rare noisy party for a time when the speaker of (22) needs quiet, and there is in (13) an implication that the speaker did not expect that the paper would be a problem to write--that he thought it unlikely. Note that if the frequentative adverb in (10) and (11) is removed, the sentences are much worse, unless of course we do some contextual chess-playing:

- (10)a ??That movie managed to make me cry.
- (11)a ??It managed to rain on my day off.

That is, rain on any given day off is hardly odd, nor is the idea of crying at one movie, at some point in one's life, while rain every time one takes a day off and crying at all sad movies are much more unlikely. Another possible interpretation of (10), (12) and (13) has it that the speaker of (10) was trying not to cry, that efforts were being made to

get occupants for the house, and that the speaker in (13) was trying not to allow the paper to become a problem. In fact, if one makes it explicit that no one is making any effort to accomplish the opposite of the action, the sentences become much worse:

- (23) *I've heard that crying is good for the eyes, so I always try to cry as often as possible, and sad movies always manage to make me cry.
- (24) ?*The citizens of this town are trying to keep that old house empty, and so it has managed to remain unoccupied for years.
- (25) *I've tried to make writing this paper as hard for myself as possible, and so writing it has managed to become quite a problem.

Actually, however, this is merely unlikelihood in different guise. Like difficulty, unlikelihood can be based on inherent properties, or on the fact that someone with some power in the matter is trying to keep the event from occurring. Thus, if the citizens of the town want the house unoccupied, it is hardly likely, in the natural course of things and assuming they have some power, that someone will occupy it.

- (26) That house didn't manage to remain unoccupied for very long.

Both (12) and (26) commit us to the unlikelihood of the house's remaining empty; therefore, manage presupposes unlikelihood. There is, in fact, a relationship between difficulty and unlikelihood, although I am not at all sure how it should be formally regarded. In a totally natural situation dependent upon abilities, if a thing is difficult--like running a 4-minute mile--then it is probably true that, for any random person, it is unlikely that he will do it. On the other hand, if a thing is not unlikely in a similar situation, it would be assumed to be also not difficult.³ We could call this relationship either entailment or implication. (Unlikelihood is, of course, in the real world, generally dependent upon expectations, either generally held or of the speaker alone.)

In any case, an analysis of expectation of unlikelihood will allow us to handle minimal pairs like (27):

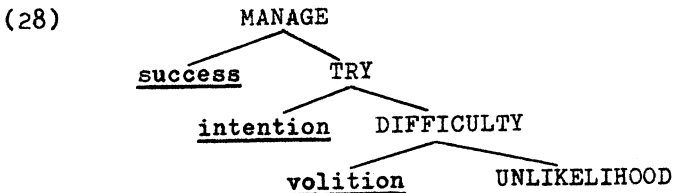
- (27)a *Jacques managed to learn French as a child.
 b Irving managed to learn French as a child.

where try and difficulty really do not matter--language learning as a child is not something you try for, but rather something which is thrust upon you; furthermore, it can be considered either difficult in either case, or not difficult in either case. That is, it is either difficult to learn a language at that age, or else young children pick up language so quickly that it is not difficult for them to learn,

and in neither case does it matter whether it is their first language. (27)a, then, can only be explained by the assumption that, given that one of the defining characteristics of a Frenchman is that he speaks French natively, there is nothing at all unlikely about "Jacques" having learned the language early, while it is generally assumed to be unlikely that someone with a name like "Irving" will do so. The inability to analyze this pair with a presupposition of difficulty is due to the nature of learning a language early--no volition is involved. We can assume that neither Jacques nor Irving was consulted about whether they were to learn French or not.

A particularly interesting result occurred when I showed (12) to a number of naive speakers. All of them immediately assumed that the house was haunted--i.e., that something inherent in the house itself was trying to keep it unoccupied. After this initial reaction, they all changed their interpretation to one of unlikelyhood that the house would remain unoccupied. Thus, they immediately tried to analyze the sentence with the basic presupposition of manage, i.e., try; when they realized that this interpretation would not fit the real world, they went down the line of presuppositions until they found one that would.

Their behavior supports the theory which Dr. Fillmore advances in his paper in this volume. In fact, I think this sort of presupposition vanishing is a special case of frame-extension. Thus, as the tree in (28) shows,



we have a continuing line of presuppositions, and at each step, something is filtered out of the meaning. Let us assume, for example, that manage is decomposed into try + success, i.e., we have already shown that manage presupposes try, and if you say (1)a, you have committed yourself to the truth of "John cashed the check." Try, however, requires intentional action, and in order to account for sentences which block this interpretation, such as (3) - (8), we must filter out the notion of intention, which leaves us with difficulty; difficulty, again, requires volition--"It would not be difficult to fall down the stairs" is a possible sentence, but not "It would not be difficult for that tree to fall over." By moving down to unlikelyhood, we have eliminated volition, which will allow us to handle sentences like (10) - (13), (21) and (22).

This, I believe, is what a native speaker does when he

hears a sentence with manage. For example, when I showed

- (29) Harry's dog manages to wake him up
whenever he dozes off on the couch.

to a number of naive speakers, I got three interpretations, each of which is transparently dependent upon the individual's view of the world. As with sentence (18), the interpretations were: (a) the dog was trying intentionally to wake Harry up; (b) the dog was not trying to wake Harry up--possibly he was just howling at a siren or thumping his tail on the floor--however, it is difficult to wake Harry up; and (c) it is unlikely that the dog should awaken Harry every time he falls asleep on the couch. This sentence was particularly useful, as there is a way to test the speaker's view of the world. Dog owners, who tend to ascribe all sorts of qualities to their pets, including intention, thought, and the ability to solve quadratic equations, took the first interpretation, which granted the dog intention. Those who could not quite see this point of view presumably went on to the second and third interpretations--in fact, one of those who chose the third interpretation said that she had first considered the second interpretation, but had decided that it cannot be difficult to wake up someone who has just "dozed off," as opposed to really falling asleep. Thus, in each case, the speaker starts off considering the basic interpretation, and, if that is blocked, proceeds down to the next, and so on down the line.

The hierarchical analysis, then, allows us to explain the various occurrences of manage without recourse to multiple homonymous verbs or presuppositions that blink in and out of existence at random, as well as furnishing some predictive possibilities for other verbs with some of the same peculiarities.

While I have not yet made a very thorough study of the predicate happen, it appears that this verb also may benefit from the type of analysis I have suggested for manage. I am not at all sure precisely what is going on with happen, but tentatively I think we can assume that happen presupposes something like "unplanned action." That is, both (30)a and its negation, (30)b commit us to (31).

- (30)a I happened to be in D.C. when Nixon
resigned.
b I didn't happen to be in D.C. when
Nixon resigned.
(31) I didn't plan to be/not to be in D.C.
when Nixon resigned.

i.e., although the speaker may have planned to be in D.C. at a specific time, the fact that Nixon's resignation coincided with the speaker's presence in or absence from the city was unplanned. This will account very nicely for sentences like:

- (32) I happened to find a penny in the gutter.
 (33) If it happens to rain, Mary will be glad she took her umbrella.
 (34) If the dog happens to want out, make sure you dry his paws before letting him in again.

However, I don't think that with a sentence like (35) we want to say that it was totally by chance that the speaker bought the book--buying a book is something one has to intend to do.

- (35) I happened to pick up a book today that I think you might be interested in.

Furthermore, happen cannot occur when the speaker has a strong interest in the action, as shown by the unacceptability of (36), even when pure chance is involved, as in (37).

- (36) *I really want to know! Did John happen to cash the check?
 (37) *I happened to find the money to save my Aunt Bertha from starvation.

Thus, it seems that happen also presupposes that the action is unimportant to the speaker, since (39) follows from both (38)a and its negative (38)b:

- (38)a John happened to cash the check.
 b John didn't happen to cash the check.
 (39) It is unimportant (to me) whether or not John cashed the check.

This presupposition of unimportance or disinterest also accounts for the polite uses of happen, e.g., in (40):

- (40) Did you happen to pick up those things I asked you to get?

which gives the addressee an out, in the event they failed to do what they were asked, by implying that the matter is of little importance anyway. We can, then hypothesize some sort of hierarchy, in which happen immediately presupposes unimportance or disinterest on the part of the speaker. This in turn entails that there will be a lack of planned action--with the assumption that the matter is unimportant enough that chance may be allowed to take its course. We would, then, expect that the next step would be the assumption that, given that there is no planned action, there will be no expectations as to possible results. To support this, then, we find sentences like (41) - (43):

- (41) I don't expect anyone to call, but if someone happens to, will you take a message?
 (42)a *Queen Elizabeth happened to get a suite of rooms in Buckingham Palace.
 b Annie the Charwoman happened to get a suite

of rooms in Buckingham Palace.

- (43)a *Jacques happened to learn French as a child.
 b Irving happened to learn French as a child.

(42)a and (43)a are, as we noted with examples (16) and (27), rendered unacceptable by the conflict between the lack of expectations required by the predicate happen and the very definite expectations of likelihood pragmatically presupposed for Queen Elizabeth, Annie the Charwoman, Jacques and Irving.

I'm not very happy with this tentative analysis of happen, but I suspect that there is a possible hierarchical analysis similar to that proposed for manage, which will allow us to account for this predicate as well.

As another example, let us take manage's opposite number, fail. The one thing basic to all uses of fail is the expectation of likelihood, as in (44) - (48):

- (44) Rain failed to materialize.
 (45) It never fails! Harry always shows up just as we're sitting down to dinner.
 (46) My car failed to start this morning.
 (47)a Queen Elizabeth failed to get a suite of rooms in Buckingham Palace.
 b *Annie the Charwoman failed to get a suite of rooms in Buckingham Palace.
 (48)a Jacques failed to learn French as a child.
 b *Irving failed to learn French as a child.

(44) - (46) are unacceptable unless it is presupposed that rain was likely, that the speaker has by now learned to expect that Harry will show up at dinner-time, and that the car is expected to start. The distribution of stars in (47) and (48) is reversed from that in (42) and (43), and in (16) and (27). This is due to the fact that while the lowest level of both the manage and happen hierarchies is the presupposition of unlikelihood, that of fail is the presupposition of likelihood. Thus, the 'a' sentences, which were bad in (16), (27), (42) and (43) because it is likely that the subject will perform the action anyway, are good in (47) and (48) for precisely the same reason. Mere expectation of likelihood, however, will not account for sentences like (49) - (51).

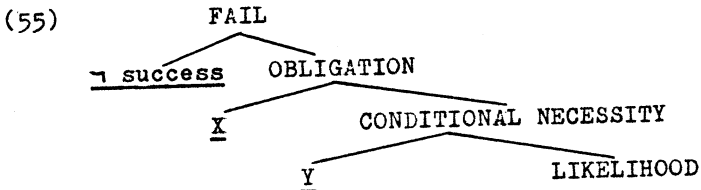
- (49) John failed to catch the 8:30 train, so he was late to work.
 (50) Dick failed to understand why Pat was sewing pieces of recording tape into her hems.
 (51) Simon failed to realize that all flights had been cancelled.

Rather, I think there is some sort of notion of conditional necessity--i.e., if John is to arrive at work on time, he must catch the 8:30 train.⁴ Similarly, it is implied that had

Dick understood the reasons for Pat's actions, he would have done something which could not have occurred without this understanding--for instance, he would have stopped her, he would have helped her thread the needles, etc. Finally, had Simon realized that the flights were cancelled, he would not have wasted time getting to the airport or whatever.⁵ There seems to be a relationship between this conditional necessity (if that's what it is) and likelihood--i.e., if X is necessary in order for Y to take place, and if Y is the outcome desired, then I think we can assume that X is likely to take place, given human volition. Since we're fudging anyway, let's call it implication. However, there is another element in fail.

- (52) The prosecution failed to call the one witness who could have shed some light on the matter.
- (53) It makes no difference that Algernon failed, as usual, to do his assigned work.
- (54) *The one morning Merkel fails to arrive late, there's nothing for him to do until noon, anyway.

(53) eliminates any idea that mere unlikelihood or conditional necessity is all that is involved. The unacceptability of (54) shows that what we have in this set of examples is something like obligation. That is, in a context in which it is pragmatically presupposed that there is an obligation which is met, as in (54), fail cannot occur, even though the sentence makes it clear that arriving late was likely, and that there was no conditional necessity on his arriving late. (43) is like (18) and (29) in that it can take any of the three readings, i.e., it is the obligation of the prosecution to call the witness; it is a conditional necessity if conviction is desired, and it is expected that the prosecution will call such a witness. Thus, I think we can construct a tree (albeit highly fudged) for fail, similar to that for manage.



Again, the hearer of a sentence involving fail will try to analyze its meaning with the presupposition of obligation, and if that is blocked, he will go on to conditional necessity, and if that is not possible, on to likelihood.

I am not at all sure what is being filtered out of obligation to produce necessity, or out of necessity to produce expectation of likelihood, although I suspect that the latter

may be something like volition. The 'X' may, of course, be intention, but I am not entirely happy with that answer.

As I mentioned before, I believe these vanishing presuppositions are special cases of Fillmore's progressively extended frames, discussed in this volume. The scenario is, after all, merely the background information which we bring to the understanding of any given word or utterance. Presuppositions are supposed to account for much of this background material.

By filtering out the various restrictions on the left hand side of the trees in (28) and (55) and proceeding down the line of presuppositions, then, we are progressively broadening the field of possible scenarios for occurrences of that predicate, and thus allowing more and more leeway for its usages and meaning. Dr. Fillmore has already demonstrated that possible contexts expand from a basic, central frame. This exercise in presuppositions of implicative verbs indicates, I think, that they expand in logical directions and in predictable order.

Footnotes

Those of you who have read the paper by Thompson and Wright in this volume will understand that I must be happy to absolve all those who helped me with this paper of any responsibility for the errors occurring therein. Among these kind people are Dr. George Lakoff, who, when I first noticed some of the peculiarities of manage, pointed out that my analysis seemed to be a special case of Dr. Fillmore's theory, and who spent a good deal of time discussing various aspects of implicative verbs with me, as well as suggesting the tree structure which I have used to analyze the sequence of presuppositions. Dr. Charles Fillmore discussed both his theory and my analysis with me before the conference and provided many helpful examples and insights. Finally, my deep thanks to Marlene Abrams, who listened to my ravings for some weeks, contributing a great deal of helpful discussion, while managing to happen to fail to allow me to lose my optimism about the project.

¹It is possible, of course, that such uses of manage originated as playful misuses of language, but the fact is that they are no longer playful, but rather are accepted as serious sentences, and must be dealt with on that level. Note, for example, the difference in tone between an obvious playful misuse of a predicate, as in (i), and a similar occurrence of manage:

- (i) It wants to rain whenever I have a day off.
- (ii) It manages to rain whenever I have a day off.

²Another possible interpretation of (15)b is that manage

can be used because Harry was trying not to insult Ursula. However, this is just another form of difficulty. Something can be difficult either through its own inherent properties, as, for instance, if Ursula were a very easy-going person who never takes offense, or because someone (possibly yourself) is trying to keep you from doing it, as might be the case in (9).

³Of course, once human intention gets into it, all sorts of things happen. For example, it is difficult to do an all-niter, although by no means unlikely. On the other hand, we might make a distinction between lexical "difficulty" and presuppositional "difficulty." The lexical item is used frequently when all we mean is "discomfort."

- (iii) It's difficult to get up at 6:00 o'clock every morning.

We generally use sentences like (iii) when actually "getting up" at any hour isn't difficult at all--it's just very uncomfortable. Aside from the syrupy philosophical point that we create our own difficulties, I think there is a valid linguistic argument here.

- (iv) It's difficult to learn a foreign language.

could be answered by something like "Yes, but we all have to because most schools have a language requirement." However, the amount of language that we learn for a language requirement isn't really difficult to learn--we just don't enjoy it. However, it is difficult to learn a foreign language thoroughly--and it's also very unlikely that any given person will do it.

Another argument that could be raised is that difficulty and unlikelihood can both apply either because of inherent properties or because someone is trying to keep the event from occurring. The difference between the two, then, is that difficulty involves volition, while unlikelihood need not. Thus, if something has no inherent difficulty, and no one is trying to keep you from doing it (including yourself), then it is not unlikely that you will do it. Examples like:

- (v) It isn't difficult to fall down the stairs.

then, don't mean that it's likely that you will do so. If you are normal, you will try to keep yourself from falling downstairs.

⁴This sentence is still good even if we specify all sorts of things which eliminate simple likelihood of John's catching that train--e.g., it is his first day at work; he usually drives or takes a bus; the 8:30 train usually doesn't run, and so on.

⁵Karttunen, in his paper in this volume, takes fail as presupposing try. While the issue is not central to his

discussion, it might be best to avoid confusion by pointing out that this is not necessarily the case. For example, in (51), I do not think that we have to assume that Simon was expected to realize that the flights were cancelled, and he certainly did not try (and fail) to realize it.

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